

Reveries of a Tramp; No. xxii.

Staten Island's Potter's Field

Arthur Hollick

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BOX IV

REVERIES OF A TRAMP.

NO. XXII.

It has occurred to the Tramp that possibly many Staten Islanders have never visited our local Potter's field or even know where it is located. Some may not even be aware that such a thing exists within our borders; for in these days of bicycles, when nearly everyone keeps to the beaten roads and highways, the by ways are but little explored, and, even to the cross-country wanderer, the little hidden tract where the flotsam and jetsam of the seamy side of our life finds its final resting place, may well escape attention.

Nestled in a patch of woodland on the County farm, where they cannot be seen from any of the public roads, are the graves of those who have been interred at public expense, and such of the inscriptions in connection with them as are decipherable tell stories which are nearly always pathetic and often tragical.

In one section, more or less isolated from the rest, are the graves of sailors who have died in the United States Marine hospital at Stapleton. These all face north, and, except the newest ones, which are as yet unmarked, are mostly provided with headboards, upon each of which is inscribed "U. S. M. H.," followed by the name, age and date of death of the deceased. They are numbered in several series, apparently according to the years of interment, but many, even of the older ones, are without any means of identification.

One, which stands out conspicuously from its fellows, is well rounded and sodded and is provided with a headstone of white marble, on which is chiseled the legend:

Charles G. Pollitt,
of Radcliffe,
England.
Born Oct. 14, 1871,
Died, May 9, 1896.

Lying on this grave, when I was last there, was a faded floral wreath and anchor.

Although there is an unmistakable atmosphere of indifference and neglect in connection with them, they are at least secure from the desecration to which the graves in the cemetery of the Sailor's Retreat—the precursor of the Marine hospital—were subjected. These are located in the rear of that institution, upon what once was a retired, pleasant, grassy slope, but is now an open common, given over to stray animals and garbage dumps. The graves are almost obliterated and all the headstones have been either broken or battered so that the inscriptions are not discernible, or else they have been utilized by the thrifty neighbors for curbstones or door steps. This is a digression, I am aware, but I could not refrain from mentioning the facts which make the sequence of events complete, between the past and the present.

But to return to our Potter's field and particularly to that part where the typical human derelicts are stranded—those persons who acted their respective parts in the drama of life, but left little or nothing behind them by which they may be remembered or even recognized, in the majority of cases. The more recent graves are marked by headboards, painted to imitate stone, and are numbered, but without inscriptions of any kind. The older ones were originally marked by small wooden boards, sharpened and driven into the ground, upon most of which brief records were inscribed. As might be expected, few of these are now in place, but lie scattered over the plot, often far from the graves to which they belong. Some of the lettering is merely pencil scribbling and in other cases the lettering has been erased after having been painted. Nearly every one which is decipherable is for the period between 1889 and 1893.

In those which have been selected as typical examples the orthography and diction are not always up to the standard of our modern educational institutions, but they furnish abundant food for

thought and the plain facts which they proclaim are far more pathetic in their harshness than are the majority of the sentiments expressed in the verses, quotations or emblems on the elaborate monuments in our private burying grounds.

In the majority of instances the name of the undertaker who brought the body is given, together with the date, but sometimes these are lacking, and if the name of the deceased was not known the record is necessarily brief and laconic, as, for example :

An Italian
from Hannah Street
died of
Small Pox.

The Cook
of the
Wreckers' Boat.

The majority of cases, however, are those of persons who were found drowned, viz :

Unknown Man
found drowned at
the Plaster Mill,
New Brighton,
September 14, 1889.

1893.
Unknown Man.
found at Burfield's Dock,
New Brighton,
May 25.

1893.
Drowned Man
brought by
Geo. Schaefer,
June 10.

Drowned Man
unknown,
brought by
Martin Hughes,
Undertaker,
June 23, 1889.

Unknown
Man
found drowned
at
South Beach,
May 5, 1890.

Unknown Man,
found drowned
at South Beach,
May 20, 1889.

Drowned Man,
unknown,
found at
South Beach,
June 13, 1889.

Unknown
Man
found drowned
at Doyle's Dock,
May 27, 1890.

Unknown
Man
found drowned
at St. George,
Buried Aug. 9, 1890.
Age 40 years.

Unknown
man found at
Fort Wadsworth
May 21, 1890.

Unknown
Man
Drowned.
Found at
Port Richmond,
January 25, 1890.

Also
unknown child,
found at Elm Park,
January 30, 1890.

Unknown Man
died
at New York Bay,
Decbr, 90

Unknown Child
found at New Y. Bay,
December 90.
Mart. Hughes,
Undert.

Unknown
Man and child
found on the Beach,
at Clifton,
October 25, 1889,
Both in this Grave,
Brought by
Martin Hughes,
Undertaker.

A
Drowned Child,
brought by
Martin Hughes,
Undertaker,
May 2, 1889.

Unknown
Woman
Found Drowned
at
Prince's Bay,
May 10, 1890.

Herman George,
Found Drowned
at Chelsea,
Aug. 14, 1890.
Age 45 years.

William
Miller
Et. 50 years
attempted suicide
by jumping from
Ferry-Boat Westfield.
Died at Alms-House
January 13, 1890.

The land has its tragedies, as well as the waters, and in both environments men and children seem to constitute by far the larger percentage of the victims. Women are recorded but very seldom :

Unknown
Baby
found dead
at Low Hill
New Brighton
September 14, 1889.

Unknown Child
found in a sewer
at Stapleton
February 21, 1890.

Unknown Man
Died October 24th 1890 at New Dorp.
Aged 58.

Suzitte Schuontz,
who was found
Dead in Bed at
Greenridge,
November 30, 1889.
Brought by
Martin Hughes
Undertaker.

Jacob Hoffman
shot himself at
New Brighton.

An
Unknown Man
found
SHOT
on the
Willow-Brook Road
in front of
Dreeger's Place,
April 17th 1890.
brought by
I. A. Silvie
Undertaker
April 22, 1890.

Along the eastern border of the plot a ditch has been dug for the purpose of draining an adjoining swampy tract and the sides of this ditch have become undermined and broken down, so that the inner bank has eaten its way into the cemetery and is rapidly nearing some of the graves. Within a few inches of the present edge of the ditch is one, conspicuous amidst its incongruous surroundings, marked by the only marble headstone amongst them, which bears the inscription :

In memory of
ANNA,
wife of
Robert Bell,
who died
June 8, 1862
aged 38 years.

Go home dear friends and shed no tears
I must lie here till Christ appears.

* * * *

Possibly our Potter's field is no more neglected and no more a matter of apparent indifference than are similar places in other communities, and I do not wish to philosophise on the subject; but that it would be worth while to mitigate the harshness of the surroundings by a little more evidence of care and sympathy is the humble opinion of

THE TRAMP.

Arthur Hollick

